DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 191 617 RC 012 207

AUTHOR Chavers, Dean
TITLE Equitable Distribution of Educational Information for Native Americans.
PUB DATE Jul 78
NOTE 23p.: Paper presented at the Mini-Conference on Equitable Distribution of Educational Information for Minority Groups, the Far West Laboratory (San Francisco, CA, July, 1978).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrative Organization: *American Indian Education: American Indians: *Cultural Isolation: Educational Innovation: Enrollment Trends: *Federal Indian Relationship: Federal Programs: Government Role: Information Sources: Parent Participation: Program Implementation: Rural American Indians: *Social Isolation: Teacher Education: *Tribal Sovereignty: Tribes: Trust Responsibility (Government): Urban American Indians

ABSTRACT

Isolation, the legal status of Indian tribes, and structural barriers impede full participation in the educational process by Native American Indians and thus create a time lag between the adoption of the best educational practices in schools serving Indian students and the adoption of those practices in other schools. While physical isolation is the predominant barrier to participation by rural and reservation Indians, social isolation particularly affects urban Indians. Cultural and linguistic isolation affects both rural and urban Indians, but linguistic isolation is most adverse to rural Indians. The legal status of Native people is a basic barrier to their participation in educational innovations. Because the bureaucracy which operates the Federal Indian system is not accountable to the people it serves, Natives hold few positions of power and authority. Structural barriers to participation include lack of accountability, fragmentation of Native people, the minority status of Indians, low use of written materials, and lack of research on the education of Indians. Necessary steps to stimulate participation of Natives in the educational process include tribal economic development and control, qualification of Natives as teachers and administrators, establishment of tribally chartered and operated schools, parental involvement and control, and improvement in delivery systems for the flow of education information. (CM)

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EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF EDUCATIONAL INFORMATION FOR NATIVE AMERICANS

by Dean Chavers*

A. Background

The adoption of the best educational practices in schools serving Native American Indian students often lags years behind the adoption of these practices in other schools. Blauch reported in 1938 that some of the educational practices in schools for Indians were as much as 25 years behind the practices of the public schools, and that students were being taught, for instance, how to make shoes by hand when technology had already made this type of marufacture obsolete (1).

I reported two years ago that the average whole-school time to adoption of four innovations in four Federal Indian boarding schools ranged from 36 months to 56 months after teachers first received information about the innovations, and that one of the four had not been heard about by a substantial minority of the teachers. The predominant sources of information about the four innovations were other teachers, and college classes and catalogs (2). Of 26 possible educational practices included in a preliminary survey to school administrators, only five were reported to have been widely adopted in the four schools; the other 21, or slightly over 80%, were not adopted widely (3).

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* President, Bacone College, Muskogee, OK 74401

Paper presented at the Mini-Conference on Equitable Distribution of Educational Information for Minority Groups, the Far West Laboratory, San Francisco, California, July 1978.

RC 012207

The nature of the innovations which were not widely adopted shows that the parents of the students are effectively isolated from the educational program; there was no parental involvement in textbook selection or curriculum planning, no regular communication with parents, little conferencing with parents, and no choices offered to parents in the selection of courses of study for their children (4).

There are some 300,000 school-age children in the United States who are identified by the Bureau of Indian Affairs as "Native American," using the criterion of one-quarter or more "blood quantum" as being necessary to be classified as Native American (5). Since the middle of the 1950's there has been a dramatic and pronounced geographic shift in this population from predominantly rural and reservation centered to a slight predominance of urban dwellers over rural dwellers. The 1970 Census reported that there were 400,000 urban dwelling Indians, and some 420,000 rural and reservation dwellers, or some 55% urban and 45% rural (6). This is a dramatic shift from the 1960 Census report, which showed some 10% of the Indian population as city dwellers (7).

Census data also show that the majority of the urban dwellers are mixed bloods, and that the majority of the rural dwellers are full bloods or close to being full bloods (8). The movement from rural to urban areas in many ways is the internal U.S. version of a "brain drain" which characterizes the relationship of the intelligentsia of many Third World countries to the educational and economic establishment of the nation. The rural dwelling Indian person is most likely to be a Native speaker or bilingual in his native language and English, while the urban dwelling

Indian is most likely to be monolingual in English or have the ability to understand some of his native language (9).

From an original intention to provide education to Indian tribes as a Federal endeavor, as the result of treaty negotiations which recognized the tribes as sovereign "domestic dependent nations," (10) the Federal government by executive fiat and usurpation of the authority of Congress has increasingly since 1890 reneged on its responsibility to provide education for Native people (11).

Today, the 200 Federal schools for Native people serve some 50,000 students (12), or about 15% of the total, and this percentage is steadily shrinking. The other 250,000 Native students attend public schools, predominantly schools which are on or near a reservation. These 250,000 students can be further divided into those who attend schools on or near a reservation, about 100,000, and those who attend schools in urban areas, some 150,000 (13). This 250,000 total can also be divided into those who attend schools which have large concentrations of Native students, some 200,000 perhaps, and those who attend schools with few Native students, about 50,000.

Even with this apparent trend toward assimilation, there is a major problem with Native people's isolation from the mainstream of educational accomplishment. The overall median number of years of school completed for the nations's Native population is about nine, or about three years less than the nations's median for adults (14).

B. Barriers to Participation

There are three types of barriers to full participation by Native people in the educational process--isolation, the legal status of Indian tribes, and structural barriers.

(i) Isolation: There are four types of "isolation" which prevent the free flow of information to Native peoples--physical, social, cultural, and linguistic.

Physical isolation is the predominant barrier to participation by rural and reservation Indians. There are some 55 million acres of "Indian land" across the nation, and most of this land and its inhabitants are located in remote areas of the nation (15). Huge tracts of this land are without paved roads, without access to telephones, without ready access to mail service, reachable only with difficulty by automobile, and only marginally productive of life sustaining products (16).

The reason for the creation of these reservations, which are tracts of land ostensibly held in trust by the Federal government for the use of Native people, was to protect the Native from the bad influences of the worst elements of frontier society, to prevent the Native from learning the worst elements of American culture, and to teach him, in isolation, the best elements of the dominant culture (17). Initially, this teaching was done by missionaries, and the missionary spirit remains as a vestige in the Federal schools of today, with the teachers and administrators viewing themselves as emissaries of the American people to the heathen Natives.

The missionaries and their successors assumed that the only way to teach the Native was to eradicate all traces of the original culture, to forbid the speaking of Native languages by the children, and to keep parents and children physically separated for as long as possible (18). These missionaries have been frequently stymied in their efforts to stamp out traces of Native culture, and the Native who has attended Federal schools and continues to speak his language and practice other elements of his culture is said to have gone "back to the blanket."

One of the main assumptions of this plan is that parents involved in the educational process will be a hindrance rather than a help. In practice still today, the administrators try to remove the children as far away from their parents as possible, and keep them away as long as possible.

One result of this practice is that the Native child only imperfectly learns the elements of American culture; the language and the culture are basically learned at a theoretical level, with little opportunity to put the theory into practice. Today, most of the 200 Federal schools are still located in isolated rural towns, such as Carson City, Nevada and Chilocco, Oklahoma (19).

Physical isolation of Native populations preceded the establishment of national parks and game refuges, and set the example, unintentionally, for the ways to preserve things which were in danger of extinction and which the Federal government deemed worthy of saving.

Social isolation is the predominant barrier to participation by urban Indians. Studies in Denver, Los Angeles, and Chicago found

that the urban migrant typically interacted predominantly with members of his own tribe, less often with members of other Indian tribes, and the least often with non-Indians (20). Thus, the "natural" preference for interaction with others with whom he feels most comfortable tends to create social ghettos of urban Natives, and sometimes these ghettoes exist as geographic concentrations in an urban area.

On reservations social isolation also operates. The typical reservation agency town is laid out with the government employees--land agents, teachers, administrators, and other functionaries--on one side of the tracks, and the Native population on the other side of the tracks. There is little interaction between the two groups except in their official capacities (21).

Cultural isolation through the religious ceremonies, inter-tribal meetings, powwows, and similar activities peculiar to Native people operates in both rural and urban areas (22). Since the 1960's, there is even more of this kind of activity in urban areas than there is in rural areas, because the urban dwellers typically earn about twice as much as the rural dweller, and because the urban Indian feels that without constant attention to the details of ceremonies and religious rituals they will be forgotten, and in two or three generations will be lost completely. Because so much time is spent on Indian cultural activities, there is little time spent on the kinds of activities typical of other urban dwellers, from concerts and museums to parent-teacher organizations and political activities. It is very rare to find a Native parent as a member of a PTA group.

Cultural isolation is also evident in the content of the 375 Native newspapers, the 30 radio stations which are predominantly or partly Native in ownership, and the handful of TV stations which feature some Native programming (23). Very rarely do these media feature news articles or topics that are not predominantly about Indian-related issues--land claims, court settlements, tribal elections, appointments to positions in Native affairs, and so on. Education is not likely to be mentioned if it is not about Federal schools or Indian education.

There are two reasons for the channeling of this content toward an almost exclusively Native orientation. First, the majority of the publications and broadcasters are either tribally owned or chartered, or they are owned by some special interest group, such as a missionary society, and thus are proprietary in nature. Their role is not the same as the typical metropolitan newspaper, for instance, to address the important issues of the day, but to address the issues which are important to the proprietor. Secondly, the editors and writers for these publications for the most part are localites, rather than cosmopolites, and many times feel uncomfortable reporting on events outside their spheres of interest.

Linguistic isolation operates as a barrier in both rural and urban areas, but is most important as a barrier in rural areas. There are still some 300 or more Indian languages spoken in the United States (24), and in certain tribes, almost every member will be fluent in the Native language. This is true of almost all tribes of the Southwest, including the 19 Pueblos, the Navajo, the Hopi, the Pima, the Papago, the Havasupai, and several others, and to many of the tribes of the

Midwest and the upper Midwest. Since about one-third to one-half of the Native population is more comfortable conversing in a Native language than in English, even the 375 Native newspapers have only limited readership in many Native communities. This lack of ability in English is a major reason for the lack of participation by Native people in urban areas.

(ii) Legal Status: From a broader perspective, the basic barrier to the free flow of information about educational practices is the legal status of Native people (25). This legal status is unique to Natives of the United States, and similar systems do not exist in other parts of the world which have been colonized by Europeans in the past few hundred years. This type of system has apparently never existed in any other country which has been colonized, including the extensive colonizations in the Middle East in the past 2,000 years, the colonizations of the Far East during the same period, or the colonies established by the ancient Romans, Greeks, Assyrians, and others.

This legal system defines Native tribes in the United States as a legally distinct people, legal entities which exist in the nation, which are entirely internal, which are dependent on the Federal government for certain functions, having treaty relations with the Federal government in a capacity as legal equals, and at peace with the United States. Even though the treaties were signed between equals during the 1700's and the first three-quarters of the 1800's, by the end of the 1800's the United States had begun to act not as an equal to the tribes, but as the "Great White Father" (26).

The "Great White Father" is, by definition, all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful, and omnipresent, while the children, legal wards of the government, are in a tutelage relationship to the father. The last 100 years has been a protracted period of the tribes trying, sometimes fruitlessly, to assert their powers over their members, to maintain systems of government, and to remain at arm's length from the Federal government.

Thus there is a great discrepancy between the legal and theoretical position of Native tribes vis-a-vis the Federal government and their actual position. The result of the omniscient assumption of the Federal government in Indian affairs has been that functionaries of the government have been given control of Native land and resources, control of the educational system, the right to deny Native people the practice of their religions and the speaking of their languages (27), and they have reduced the individual members of the tribes to pawns in a game of political and economic struggle between opposing factions.

Another result is that some 60% of the resources which are produced on Indian lands leave the reservations in the first cycle of economic generation, and do not benefit the inhabitants at all (28). Very few of the dollars produced recycle on the reservation, which means that instead of each dollar of hard goods produced generating 2½-3 more dollars through jobs in processing, distribution, and marketing, each dollar produces something less than one dollar. The economic system of most reservations is like a sieve, with dollars leaking out on all sides.

In addition to producing poverty for the reservation dwellers, this economic and legal system has produced generations of Native people who are powerless because of the structure of the system, and because their attitude toward education, economic development, and self-improvement is defeatist in nature. Very few of the leaders of reservations are actually leaders of their people; they are puppets or figureheads manipulated by outside forces--Federal bureaucrats, economic developers, ranchers, miners, farmers, and others (29).

Since the goal of the Federal government is to assimilate the Native into the body politic, many Native people look upon education as a tool in the appropriation of the last of the resources that are left to them as the original inhabitants of the continent. History shows that when a tribe becomes "advanced" enough to satisfy the government officials, through learning and understanding English, by attaining high levels of education, and by becoming successful as workers, the government then acts to sever the Federal relationship, and to do away with the rights of the tribe as Indians (30). Since 1954 some 52 tribes and bands have been terminated in this way (31), with Congress unilaterally declaring that the treaty with the tribe is null and void, that the land that is held in trust for them can then be released to the public domain, and that the members of the tribe are no longer eligible for Federal services to Indians, such as the right to attend Federal schools for Indians, the right to receive medical treatment through the Federally-operated Indian Health Service, and the right to apply for and receive Federal loans for housing, economic enterprises, and the like.

Since the bureaucracy which operates the Federal Indian system is not accountable to the persons it serves, the operation of the system is the U.S. equivalent of domestic colonialism. As a colonized people, Natives are in a no-win position, holding few positions of power, with little authority or control over their own lives, and living a largely anomic existence.

The bureaucrats act as very effective gatekeepers, allowing only information which they want disseminated to pass through the channels of communication.

(iii) Structural Barriers: The legal status of Native tribes presents a barrier largely because it allows the legal system to be implemented through concrete actions. The most important of these concrete actions has already been stated--the lack of accountability of the Federal bureaucrats to the populations they serve.

They are accountable to higher levels of administration in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare for medical services since the Indian Health Service has been transferred to HEW, and to a lesser extent to some other Federal agency administrators for certain services (32). This system places an extra layer of government on reservation Indians, and to some extent on urban Indians who are eligible for some educational programs.

A second structural barrier is the fragmentation of Native people nationally. The typical school district on or near a reservation is governed by a board which has no Native people on it, and which in

effect substitutes for the colonization function of the Federal government where education services have been contracted to such a district by the Bureau. Many such districts are gerrymandered so that it is practically impossible for a Native person to be elected to the board (33).

Fragmentation in urban areas is a more "natural" occurrence, and results from the fact that most urban areas are multitribal in nature. Native people do not think of themselves as one race; it is only the non-Indian who thinks of Indians as being homogeneous in language and culture. It is extremely difficult for two Natives from tribes who are traditional enemies to come together to work on mutual education problems in an urban area. As stated earlier, there is little intertribal contact in urban areas compared to the degree and intensity of the contact which occurs among members of the same tribe. As a result, coalitions of Native peoples in urban areas tend to be temporary, and tend to come apart at the seams at the first mention or occurrence of conflict.

(As an aside, it is apparently not clear to the urban Native that education leads to desirable outcomes. In some research done in Santa Clara County, California, it was found that 67% of the young adults between the ages of 16 and 22 were unemployed, and a cross tabulation showed that the percentage remained substantially the same for high school graduates and dropouts (34). This survey was repeated in Alameda County, California with the same results (35). The receipt of a high school diploma apparently makes little difference as to whether a young Indian person is employed or not; whether this person is Indian or not apparently is more important.)

A third structural barrier affecting substantial numbers of urban dwellers is the fact that they are, for practical purposes, an invisible minority. Frequently the chief administrator of a district, and even the principal of a school, will not know that there are any Indian students in the district or the school. This barrier is intensified in schools and districts where Indians are a very low percentage of the total student population, which is true in over 50% of the districts with some Indian enrollment.

A fourth structural barrier affecting both urban and rural Natives is the low use of written materials of all kinds, and a high use of broadcast media. The present orientation of educational information dissemination centers is largely to print media, which therefore reach very limited numbers of Natives (36).

A fifth structural barrier which is significant is the lack of research which has been conducted on the education of Native people. It is practically impossible from a review of the research literature to pinpoint variables which predict success or failure for the Native student (37). While there has been some research done, it has tended to be little concerned with the prediction of success of the Native student. As a result, it is not possible at this time to be any more positive about predictors of educational achievement than to think or guess that the degree of facility in English, the degree of exposure to non-Indians, and the degree of Indian blood of the student, and similar factors, would predict success. And the results of the few original studies which have been done are contradictory in many cases. One study of retention of

Native college students reported that the higher the degree of non-Indian blood, the greater the chances of completion (38), while another study on the same topic reported that the lower the degree of Indian blood, the greater the chances of completion (39). Since there are apparently no other studies of this question, it is not possible at this time to come to any firm conclusions one way or the other.

C. Removing Barriers

If we assume that information is necessary for action and participation in the educational process, then the first step in stimulating a more full participation in the process is the removal of the barriers which prevent a free flow of information.

The most important change which would allow a free flow of information is the eradication of the colonial relationship of tribes to the United States. This change is also the most difficult to make, because the system is entrenched, because administrators and policy makers do not acknowledge that the system is colonial, and because such a change is a change in a theoretical social system which must be implemented through concrete actions.

A necessary step in this change is economic development of tribal resources, and control by tribes of economic resources. Many reservations could be self-supporting if this were to happen. Placing Natives in positions of authority and control would change the nature of the gatekeepers, hold them accountable to those they serve, and allow a more free flow of information. While some tribal economic development has occurred

in the last twenty years, it is proceeding at a snail's pace. It will take an act of Congress to redefine and curb the excessive powers now exercised by Federal bureaucrats.

A second change that is necessary is the training of Native persons as teachers and administrators. While there are now some 3,500 Native people who are teachers (40)--over three times as many as all other types of professionals combined--there is a need for 5,600 more to achieve parity with the rest of the nation. Moreover, a large percentage of the present 3,500 do not teach Native children. Teachers are important as role models, and also as effective users and disseminators of the best educational practices.

There are now some three dozen Indian teacher training programs funded through the Bilingual Education Act and the Indian Education Act (41). At their rate of production of graduates, in fifteen more years of operation they will have produced about 5,000 certified teachers, which, combined with attrition, will represent about 50% of parity. When account is taken of drain-off into other professions, which runs 30% or better nationally, the actual parity will likely be 35% at best. This will be after 20 years of effort, if Federal funding continues. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on teacher training.

A third change that is necessary is the establishment of tribally chartered and operated schools. There are now some 26 Indian controlled public schools (42), and 30 Indian controlled colleges in the U.S. (43). With the exception of Bacone College, all of the colleges have been established since 1967. The major problems they face are that they

receive funding almost entirely on a grant basis, with little stable funding, and that their faculty turnover is very high.

Without the first change mentioned occurring first--that is, tribal economic development--there is little hope of these schools and colleges achieving stability. With both a stable funding base through taxation of tribally owned businesses and governance responsive to the citizens they serve, there is great hope for these schools rejuvenating Native communities.

They can rejuvenate communities through a fourth change to the present system, the involvement of Native parents in the educational process. There are now two Federal programs for Indian education which mandate parental involvement, the Johnson-O'Malley program in the Bureau of Indian Affairs (44), and the Indian Education Act of 1972 (45). Both these programs, however, skirt the issue of parental involvement because they are supplemental in nature, designed to meet special educational needs of Native students which a district cannot meet. Meaningful parental involvement cannot occur in a program which requires a parent advisory committee for a special project, as both Johnson-O'Malley and the Indian Education Act do, and which has no actual control of program.

Meaningful parental involvement must involve control, which is not possible in the present system. But, just as tribally controlled schools must have first a stable economic base, so must parental involvement first have tribally controlled schools. And it is useless to establish delivery systems for the flow of education information to citizens who will not have ready access to the information or a chance to utilize the information.

This is not to say that some improvements in the present delivery system will not have an impact, but to say that such improvements in the delivery system in isolation from changes in the present Native educational system will have minimal impact. There are five ways to bring about this fifth change to attempt better dissemination. One way is to make the results of demonstration projects funded under the Indian Education Act, the Bilingual Education Act, the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, and the Developing Institutions section of the Higher Education Act, among others, more widely available. This could be easily done by the Federal administrators of these programs. Some projects have achieved outstanding results, but have not disseminated the results as required by laws and regulations. Better enforcement could correct this.

A second possibility is to make the existing resources available to Native populations. The present sites of ERIC centers, for instance, are not easily accessible to most Native users. An attempt to make the ERIC collections available in areas closer to major concentrations of Native populations would have an impact, especially the ERIC/CRESS collection.

A third possibility would be to establish, on a national level, a liaison between the producers of educational materials and the media which reach Native populations. Seldom if ever are general education articles printed, even in the publications of the National Indian Education Association. This liaison would almost of necessity have to be centrally located to be effective.

A fourth possibility is greater use of broadcast media in the dissemination process. Native Americans and other minority groups will

be better reached through radio and TV than through print media.

A fifth possibility would be a liaison between producers and the 25 national Indian organizations, the 13 state level Indian commissions, the 15 state level Indian education specialists in departments of education, the dozen or so statewide Indian education associations, and similar groups. At this time, this last approach would probably have the greatest impact of the five.

Although the changes recommended in this last section might seem so difficult to bring about that to contemplate them might bring on pessimism about the ability to bring about meaningful change in Native education, the condition at present is so bad that even a little change for the better will be felt.

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